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SUBJECT: ON THE ROAD TO 2007: REVENGE OR RECONCILIATION?

Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Nigerian political environment has undergone a seismic upheaval in the past two weeks and the aftershocks are still reverberating through the political landscape. Three issues are at the center of this rapidly evolving situation: whether President Obasanjo will seek revenge or reconciliation after the defeat of the third term in the National Assembly; whether or not Obasanjo has given up on an extension of his "mandate;" and what new political alliances are coming out of the turmoil. Poloffs met with a group of well-connected political activists recently to discuss Nigeria's political future. While it is too early to predict the outcome, the one clear message is that change is in the offing and both Nigerians and outside observers are uncomfortable predicted what Nigeria will look like by the May 29, 2007 Inauguration Day. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Poloffs hosted an informal social gathering the evening of June 7 with a collection of people well-connected to the Nigerian political scene. Attendees included a Ghanaian diplomat, members of Nigeria's House of Representatives (past and present), an Assistant Commissioner of Police, two former ministers and the head of the Foreign Ministry's International Division. The conversation centered on possibilities for the presidential elections due in 2007. While the conversation was wide ranging, the group seemed to have consensus on several points. First, most attendees expressed reservations but assumed that President Obasanjo would allow the election to go forward and the transfer of power to occur. Second, all discussion of potential presidential candidates centered on sitting governors and the current vice-president. Third, all speculation on possible candidates assumed that the next president would be from either the South-South geopolitical zone (the area around the Niger Delta) or the North. Finally, the group believed that the region the candidate comes from will be important than the political party he represents.

REVENGE OR RECONCILIATION

13. (C) Even with the recent cabinet and military shakeups, it is not clear whether Obasanjo will seek revenge on those who let him down. Three groups are at risk, his inner circle who failed to inform him of the difficulties in gaining passage of the Constitutional amendments, National Assembly members and politicians who signed on to support his third term efforts and his opponents in the anti-Third Term camp. It is more likely that he will go after the second group, the first group being too close and the third too far away.

¶4. (C) Even though the constitutional amendment is dead, most do not believe the battle is finished. The feeling was less articulated in this group than in others, but survived as an undercurrent in the conversation. As Nigeria moves towards elections, several issues remain outstanding: the ongoing crises in the country, including the Delta, the Middle Belt, the South East and the North give opportunities to manipulate the environment to engineer a state of emergency allowing Obasanjo to extend his tenure. Failure to organize INEC and allow clean elections could give the President the opportunity to remain in office until "credible" elections can be held, filling his self-described role as "Guardian of Democracy" (G.o.D.). Still, it is possible that Obasanjo is sincere in his less-than-clear statement that he intends to leave office in 2007. While the group discussed politics as if an election would happen, these interlocutors recognized that Nigeria has never had a peaceful transition from one civilian regime to another and that since 1993, arguably the freest and fairest poll in Nigeria's history, elections have been problematic.

A NEW POLITICAL CONSTELLATION?

¶5. (C) Perhaps the thorniest issue is that of political realignment. With the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) split into separate camps, each with their strengths and weaknesses, and other politicians scrambling to find a party, the prospects are good for a buildup of violence leading to the election. Among the contenders, are former heads of state Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) and Muhammadu Buhari and Vice President Atiku Abubakar in the North. In the Southwest

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former Presidential candidate Olu Falae, Lagos Governor Bola Tinubu, and President Obasanjo are the key figures. The Southeast hinges on Biafran leader Emeka Ojukwu, a re-energized APGA and movements of the various Governors, including the deposed Chris Ngige (Anambra State) and Orji Kalu (Abia State) in and out of parties. The political scene in the South-South is convoluted, but the Governors and the Delta militant groups figure prominently in the equation.

¶6. (C) According to the group of discussants, the most likely candidates for the Presidency are the 36 state governors and the sitting Vice President. The consensus was that because the Governors have had the opportunity over the last term to build a war chest and some base of support, their financial advantage would be critical. Similarly, the group thought the Vice President, as well as supporters of the President, had been able to stash enough money away to make themselves relevant in the political process. Other possible candidates such as cabinet ministers or members of the national legislature were discounted. The people present at this gathering did not believe they have generally had the opportunity to build sufficient patronage networks to be effective candidates.

¶7. (C) First, the conversation focused on governors from the South-South as potential presidential candidates. The region receives a lot of attention because it is the source of the nation's oil wealth as well as much civil conflict. Governors Odili (Rivers) and Duke (Cross River) were frequently mentioned as possible contenders. The general opinion was that Odili was better prepared because he had built a network across the region. The group discussed the general merits of a candidacy from the South-South. If a candidate was able to unify the zone's many ethnic groups and get a foothold in the Southeast region, he might be able to claim that a president from the South would be best suited to calm tensions in the Niger Delta. At the same time, coming from the South could be a liability, as Nigerians may not support a candidate associated with the Delta's problems.

18. (C) Later, the conversation turned to Northern candidates. Part of the grand bargain which allowed Obasanjo to come to power in 1999 was that Northerners assumed power would return to their region when he left office. The Muslim-dominated North is united behind the idea of a president from the region. Unfortunately, at present there is no one candidate who has the region's support and perhaps could gain some support from the South. The most likely candidate was the current Vice President, and our interlocutors believed he would at least make an attempt for the presidency. However, the VP has openly split with President Obasanjo and will have problems gaining support within the PDP. There was also discussion of General Buhari as a potentially strong candidate, although he was thought to be less well positioned than Vice President Abubakar. Former military leader Ibrahim Babangida was also mentioned as a potential candidate, but the odds on his successful candidacy were quickly dismissed by the group.

COMMENT

19. (C) While it is too early to predict what changes are in store, the one clear message from this group as well as the general public is that change is in the offing. A great deal should become clearer within the next few weeks in terms of who the likely candidates will be. For now, concerns remain about the intentions of President Obasanjo, but most appear ready to campaign in spite of the remaining uncertainties. Whatever happens, though, it appears that the main division in the Nigerian polity will produce two main candidates, one whose credentials are personal loyalty to Obasanjo and the other a product of consensus among the political class and the voters. While everyone waits for the dust from the third term to settle and some expect at least a few surprised remain in the Presidency and the National Assembly, one thing is clear: neither Nigerians nor outside observers are comfortable predicting what Nigeria will look like by the May 29, 2007 Inauguration Day.

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